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ABSTRACT

The relationship between two educational improvement initiatives--school restructuring and systemic curriculum reform--is examined in this bulletin. School restructuring tends to focus on process in schools and curriculum reform concentrates more directly on content and curriculum across a range of schools. The main features, their promises and limitations, of each initiative are discussed. A conclusion is that systemic curriculum reform can offer restructured schools a high quality curriculum, while school restructuring provides a process for building the teaching/learning environment capable of supporting such a curriculum in diverse school communities. Policy makers must reach a consensus about educational content and the delivery of resources necessary for substantial change. Equity is also a concern for both policy and practice because of the promise and perils of high standards for an increasingly diverse student population. (6 endnotes) (LMI)

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Brief to policymakers

When School Restructuring Meets Systemic Curriculum Reform

Fred M. Newmann and William H. Clune

Policymakers face a throng of proposals to improve education: chartered schools, school choice, new systems of testing, year round schools to name a few. While the merits of each initiative should be considered, policymakers must also assess how one reform relates to another. Examining the connections helps to minimize inefficiencies when separate interventions contradict one another or operate in isolation. Education policy should be crafted to support a set of mutually beneficial reforms.

We examine here the relationship between two initiatives: school restructuring and systemic curriculum reform. School restructuring tends to focus primarily upon process–the roles and rules that govern how educators and students function in schools. Systemic curriculum reform concentrates more directly on content and curriculum across a range of schools.[1] We describe the main features of each initiative, and consider both the promise and limitations systemic curriculum reform holds for school restructuring.

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BRIEF NO. 3 SUMMER 1992

School Restructuring 1
Systemic Curriculum Reform 2
The Promise of Systemic Curriculum Reform 2
Limits of Systemic Curriculum Reform 2

EA 024 125

School Restructuring

School restructuring can include any number of departures from conventional practice that fundamentally change the roles of teachers, administrators, students, and parents working with schools.[2] Some notable innovations include school-based management; team teaching across grades or disciplines; longer class periods meeting fewer times per week; replacing ability grouping with heterogeneous classes; replacing Carnegie units with outcomes-based assessment.

School restructuring differs from prior reforms in several appealing ways. It invites fundamental redesign of teaching and learning to address the underlying causes, rather than the symptoms, of low quality education. It recognizes the importance of building school-wide vision and capacity to identify and solve problems, rather than adopting one project after another to placate separate interests within the school. It understands that for reforms to work, school staff must be committed and that commitment arises largely through a participatory and collegial school organization, not a top-down hierarchy.

In its search for new approaches, however, school restructuring itself raises new problems. Teaching responsibilities broaden, calling for a host of commitments and competencies in such new roles as instructional coach, curriculum team member, entrepreneur to build new programs, student advisor/confidant, and participant in organizational decision-making. Few teachers have been formally prepared to perform well in these diverse roles.

Second, the attention to governance, collaborative professional interaction, and student need for social support can easily divert staff energy away from critical issues in curriculum and instruction. By involving teachers in numerous activities other than teaching a common curriculum, school restructuring can diminish attention from important curricular issues.

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Systemic reform promises to provide the new "beef" or substantive content to replace superficial curriculum coverage and tedious instruction in basic skills.

Finally, when teachers do focus on improving curriculum and instruction, they often confront three problems that school restructuring alone cannot solve: (a) disagreement within the school on how and what to teach; (b) lack of curriculum materials that offer challenging academic content engaging for culturally diverse and at-risk students; and, (c) district or state policies in curriculum, assessment, teacher preparation, or staff development that hinder the school's efforts to improve curriculum and instruction.

Whether school restructuring will contribute improved, high quality curriculum seems to be an open question. How can systemic curriculum reform help restructured schools to resolve these problems?

Systemic Curriculum Reform

According to advocates of systemic reform, the institutions that most influence curriculum and instruction in schools are colleges and universities that prepare teachers; state agencies that license teachers; regional agencies that issue regulations on curriculum, testing, and staff development; producers of tests and instructional materials; and staff development organizations.[3] Yet these organizations are not coordinated to support high quality, challenging curriculum. Suppose that a state developed high quality guidelines for curriculum content K-12. Publishers' texts, geared to a national market of different expectations, offer few resources to teach the intended material. The state's own university prepares novice teachers not to teach the state curriculum, but instead to pass courses in the academic disciplines and education that might even contradict the curriculum. The new state curriculum would likewise be ignored, or its aims undermined by producers of national tests. The systemic solution is to find a way of aligning the products and services of these organizations.

Reform of this sort needs to be developed through a state or broad regional framework, not school by school. Not only do schools lack authority and influence over the institutions which shape curriculum, but individual schools lack the technical capacity to develop comprehensive programs. It is the states' constitutional responsibility to provide all students equal access to high quality education.[4]

Systemic curriculum reform relies on resources and standards beyond the school, but proponents also recognize the dangers of centralized, top-down regulation. They insist that individual schools retain broad discretion over instruction. Systemic reform would provide substantive content through curriculum standards, instructional materials, assessments and staff development, but would refrain from prescribing details of classroom practice and school organization. Instead, it would present guidelines and resources for assessment, curriculum and staff development that individual schools could adapt. Teacher preparation institutions would align their instruction to the system's guidelines and resources.

The Promise of Systemic Curriculum Reform

Teachers in restructured schools often consider curriculum guides, published instructional materials, and tests woefully inadequate. They crave ideas for teaching academic subjects in ways that motivate culturally diverse students who they often feel have not been adequately prepared for the current grade level or course. Although individual teachers may work hard to develop new curriculum and tests, there is usually not enough time to reach solid consensus about the best curriculum, or to produce materials of sufficient quality to be validated by authorities beyond the school. And they worry that the knowledge and skills they teach will wither away for lack of reinforcement in subsequent curriculum.

Ideally, systemic curriculum reform would solve these problems by offering curriculum guides, instructional materials, and assessment tools impressive enough to stimulate greater staff consensus within schools. A longitudinal curriculum framework would permit teachers to assume certain student competence at entry and count on reasonable continuity in subsequent studies. Continuous access to staff development aligned with these resources would help teachers to use and adapt the curriculum to suit the special circumstances of their student body.

By providing such a framework, teachers would be free to think more productively about critical details of pedagogy which now receive almost no attention. In this sense, systemic reform promises to provide the new "beef" or substantive content to replace superficial curriculum coverage and tedious instruction in basic skills. The school restructuring process could then focus on delivering the content most effectively.

Limits of Systemic Curriculum Reform

Other nations such as Japan or Germany have already achieved alignment of curriculum, testing, and teacher preparation. These countries have an ambitious common curriculum for all students in primary school; almost no standardized

testing; and a high degree of teacher commitment and cooperation in preparing lessons to teach the curriculum. School restructuring in the United States, however, raises at least four issues that systemic reform proposals have yet to resolve: (a) reaching broad consensus on curriculum goals; (b) overcoming economic and political obstacles to institutional alignment; (c) retaining sufficient autonomy for schools and teachers to cultivate professional commitment to systemic curriculum; and (d) offering staff development broad enough to improve the existing skills of teachers and address legitimate concerns beyond curriculum.

Systemic policy in other nations is supported by strong cultural and institutional consensus over curriculum content. But in the United States, longstanding disagreement over curriculum goals will probably continue. Reaching agreement will be complicated by persisting conflict between traditional and progressive visions of education.[5] For example, traditionalists emphasize the need for exposure to broad surveys of knowledge and basic skills, while progressives stress in-depth understanding and critical thinking of a smaller set of topics.

The second problem is how actually to achieve alignment at a state, regional, or national level. The producers of curriculum guidelines, instructional materials, tests, teacher education, and staff development include a variety of public and private organizations operating under different authority structures and incentive systems. Theoretically, a central state organization could conceptualize, produce, and deliver all the required goods and services. Or the state could conceivably create powerful economic incentives for existing organizations to align their work more closely to a state framework. One problem of depending upon the state for alignment is that democratic, interest-group politics often produce trade-offs, compromises, and incoherent policy. Coordinating the work of diverse, traditionally autonomous organizations, will ultimately depend on building sustained, serious commitment to a more challenging curriculum for all children. Alignment thus depends upon broad consensus.

How to arrive at consensus on and alignment toward appropriate, *high quality* curriculum standards is another matter. Potential dangers of inadequate or even harmful systemic standards raise the dilemma of centralized, top-down, versus decentralized, bottom-up reform. How will states give specific guidance but at the same time permit local schools and individual teachers enough discretion and autonomy to respond to their unique circumstances? The challenge is to strike a balance between two extremes. A highly specific and prescribed curriculum dampens local ownership, but a very general one with broad-ranging options, offers no definitive guidance.

Systemic curriculum reform concentrates appropriately on *curriculum*, but it must also recognize the existing skills and concerns of teachers. Most teachers are not prepared for the new content or pedagogy contemplated by systemic reform. For example, "teaching for understanding" in mathematics requires both a new way of thinking about math and a new, more participatory kind of teaching.[6] At the same time, teachers raise lots of questions related to curriculum implementation. How can the curriculum be taught to a heterogeneous group? How can I get students to talk constructively with one another about the curriculum? How can I keep all students up to date when at least 20% are absent each day? How can we get all members of our teaching team to buy in to the plan? How do I respond to parents who think the curriculum is either too regimented or too permissive? Where will I find time to respond thoughtfully to each student's writing? To implement high quality curriculum teachers need help with these and other issues arising out of the new roles they assume in restructured schools. Systemic reform thus confronts a twin challenge in staff development: providing training commensurate with the difficulty of the new material and simultaneously translating it to the broader needs of teachers in specific contexts.

Conclusion

Systemic curriculum reform has the potential to offer restructured schools a high quality curriculum, while school restructuring offers a process for building the teaching/learning environments capable of supporting such a curriculum in diverse school communities. To reach this potential, policymakers must develop consensus around an inspiring vision of educational content and deliver the resources necessary for substantial change. School restructurers must focus on curriculum and confront problems with implementing a new, challenging vision of teaching and learning. Equity is an important common concern for both policy and practice because of the promise and perils of high standards for an increasingly diverse population of students.

Policymakers must develop consensus around an inspiring vision of educational content and deliver the resources necessary for substantial change.

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Endnotes

1. See Clune, W. H. (1990). Educational governance and student achievement. In W. H. Clune & J. F. Witte (Eds.), *Choice and control in American education: Vol. 2. The practice of choice, decentralization and school restructuring* (pp. 391-423). Philadelphia: Falmer Press.

2. See Murphy, J. (1991). *Restructuring schools: Capturing and assessing the phenomena*. New York: Teachers College Press; and Newmann, F. M. (1991, Fall). What is a restructured school? A framework to clarify means and ends. *Issues in Restructuring Schools, No. 1*, Madison, WI: Center on Organization and Restructuring of Schools.

3. See Smith, M. S., & O'Day, J. (1991). Systemic school reform. In S. H. Fuhrman & B. Malen (Eds.), *The politics of curriculum and testing: The 1990 Yearbook of the Politics of Education Association* (pp. 233-267). Philadelphia: Falmer Press; and Smith, M. S., O'Day, J., & Cohen, D. K. (1990). National curriculum American style: Can it be done? What might it look like? *American Educator, 14*(4), 10-17, 40-47.

4. See Clune, W. H. (in press). New answers to six hard questions from *Rodriguez*: Ending the separation of school finance and educational policy by bridging the gap between wrong and remedy. *Connecticut Law Review, 24*(3), 1-42; Smith, M. S., & O'Day, J. (1991). Educational equality: 1966 and now. In D. Verstegen (Ed.), *Spheres of justice in American schools: 1990 Yearbook of the American Educational Finanace Association* (pp. 53-100). New York: Harper & Row; and Smith, M. S., & O'Day, J. (1991). Equality in education: Progress, problems and possibilities (RB-07-6/91). New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University, Consortium for Policy Research in Education.

5. See Newmann, F. M. (in press). Beyond common sense in educational restructuring: The issues of content and linkage. *Educational Researcher*.

6. See Cohen, D. K. (1990). Revolution in one classroom: The case of Mrs. Oublier. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis, 12*(3), 311-329.

Credits

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When School Restructuring Meets Systemic Curriculum Reform

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The Center on Organization and Restructuring of Schools will study how organizational features of schools can be changed to increase the intellectual and social competence of students. The five-year program of research focuses on restructuring in four areas: the experiences of students in school; the professional life of teachers; the governance, management and leadership of schools; and the coordination of community resources to better serve educationally disadvantaged students.

Through syntheses of previous research, analyses of existing data, and new empirical studies of education reform, the Center will focus on six critical issues for elementary, middle and high schools: How can schooling nurture authentic forms of student achievement? How can schooling enhance educational equity? How can decentralization and local empowerment be constructively developed? How can schools be transformed into communities of learning? How can change be approached through thoughtful dialogue and support rather than coercion and regulation? How can the focus on student outcomes be shaped to serve these five principles?

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In the fall and spring of each year, the Center publishes an issue report which offers in-depth analysis of critical issues in school restructuring, distributed free to all persons on the mailing list. In addition, three "briefs" targeted to special audiences will be offered yearly. Our 1992 bibliography, currently available, will be updated each year and is distributed free on request. Occasional papers reporting results of Center research will be available at cost. To be placed on the mailing list and receive *Issues in Restructuring Schools*, please contact Karen Prager, Dissemination Coordinator, Center on Organization and Restructuring of Schools, University of Wisconsin, 1025 W. Johnson Street, Madison, WI 53706. Telephone: (608) 263-7575.

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